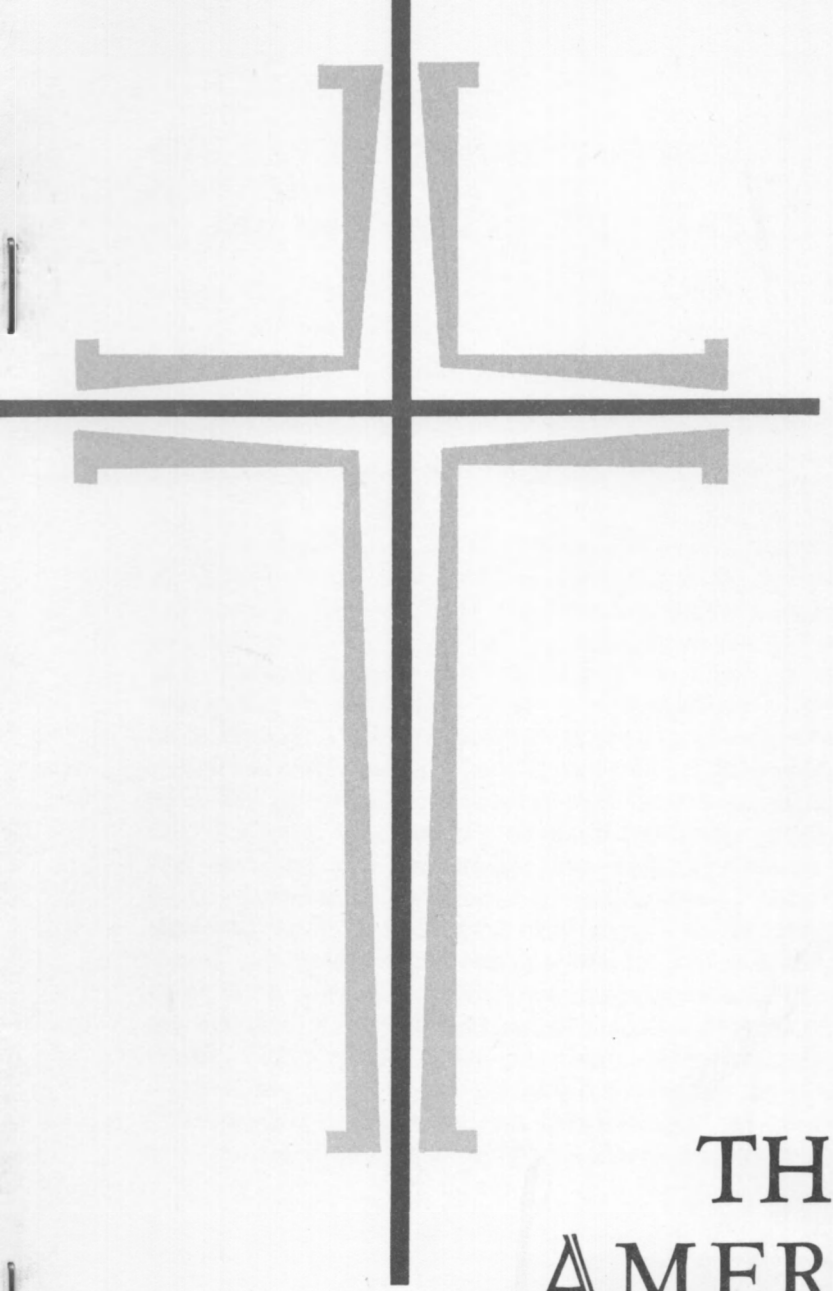

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THE DAY OF JUDGMENT IS NOW: A JOHANNINE PATTERN IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH *PEARL*

Ross G. Arthur

Medievalists have long recognized that many puzzling details of fourteenth-century English poetry can be understood by reference to patristic allegorizations of biblical passages. References to a wide variety of plants, animals, stones and even numbers turn out to have well-established connotations which convey spiritual meanings to readers who understand the system. More recently, with the modern interest in broader questions of semiotics, medieval sign theories and biblical passages concerned with the problems of interpretation have been examined not only for what they can tell us about particular details in medieval texts but also for insights into medieval ideas about meaning in general and strategies of communication.[1] Although many medieval works can be read as if their authors and audiences shared our assumptions about verbal communication, they become both more interesting and more profound when read in the context of the (very different) medieval systems of interpretation. The Middle English *Pearl* can still be read as a moving elegy on the death of a young girl, but with the aid of an historicist examination of its concern with signs and interpretation, we can also see it as a creative artist's attempt to instruct his audi-

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[1] See, for example, Ross G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1987).

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ence about the difficulties of adopting a Christian view of life after bereavement.

MIRACULOUS SIGNS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

John takes pains to show that the miracles of Christ's earthly mission are not simply the actions of a wonder-worker. He heals the sick, gives sight to the blind and raises the dead because these are actions foretold of the Messiah. Since they are signs, however, they need interpretation, as simple marvellous actions would not, and so they require an understanding, sensitive audience. It was clearly a problem for Christians in John's age that not all who witnessed the miracles were able to understand their meaning, and he deals with this difficulty by examining and categorizing the various possible interpretive choices, not in the form of a theoretical description but through narrative.

The various audience responses to a moment of crisis in John's description of the Palm Sunday narrative may serve as a focus for understanding the various categories and the centrality of the interpretive problem:

> "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father save me from this hour. But for this cause I came unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name." A voice came from heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." The multitude therefore that stood and heard, said that it thundered. Others said: "An angel spoke to him." Jesus answered, and said: "This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes. Now is the judgment of the world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out." (Jn 12:27-31)[2]

This description reveals three types of response to spiritual signs. The "multitude" perceive the voice of God as a simple, natural event. Since thunder is all that they have heard, thunder is all that has occurred, at least as far as they are concerned. They do not even see it as a natural sign, an indication, for example, of an approaching storm. Some "others," by implication fewer in number, realize that the sound is a sign, but they are for the moment unable to understand its meaning or even to identify the speaker correctly. The third group, unrepresented within the story but present for us in the author and his implied audi-

[2] Quotations from the Bible are from the Douay-Rheims Version, as closest in sense to the Vulgate.

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ence, is prepared to accept that the thunder was merely the vehicle for a structured act of communication between God and Christ. The purpose of the message, however, was not to transfer information. It was delivered "for your sakes," that is, so that some of the bystanders would have the opportunity to move from the second group to the third.

The "judgment of the world" is not a condemnation of some and an acquittal of others, as if it were carried out under the rule of law. Rather, it is a moment of discriminating choice between two groups. Those who understand or will come to understand the spiritual meaning of the miracles are revealing that they are prepared for the gift of eternal life, but those who persist in seeing the works Christ does in God's name as if they were merely physical events are cutting themselves off from salvation:

> The Jews therefore came round about him, and said to him: "How long dost thou hold our souls in suspense? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them: "I speak to you, and you believe not: the works that I do in the name of my Father, they give testimony of me. But you do not believe, because you are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice: and I know them, and they follow me. And I give them life everlasting; and they shall not perish for ever, and no man shall pluck them out of my hand." (Jn 10:24-28)

The effects of this incomprehension are nowhere clearer than when Christ, who is Truth, says, "Every one that is of the truth, heareth my voice," and Pilate replies, "What is truth?" (Jn 18:37-38).

AUGUSTINIAN DEVELOPMENTS

Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* provides us not only with a large number of authoritative decodings of symbolic objects named in the Bible and productive techniques for learning how to read spiritual signs, but also with a more general theory of how signs function in a communication system. In addition to offering a distinction between natural signs and human speech, according to whether or not they communicate by intention, he shows a great deal of concern for what is now called the "beholder's share." In fact, his basic definition of a sign includes the audience but leaves out the speaker entirely: "A sign is a

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thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses."[3]

Such a linguistic theory, which makes the listener as responsible for successful communication as the speaker, fits well with John's view of the reception of spiritual signs. No fault can be ascribed to Christ or to Christian writers if their words are not understood. The intention is to communicate, but the signs cannot even be signs for an audience not prepared to think of something beyond the immediate physical impression they make.

In his discussion of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Augustine's project is to make his audience aware of the testimony given by Christ's works in God's name; for him, the miracles are still "speaking signs," not only for their original audience but also for those who read about them in the Gospels:

> Let us interrogate the miracles themselves, what they tell us about Christ: for they have a tongue of their own, *if they can be understood.* For since Christ is Himself the Word of God, even the act of the Word is a word to us. Therefore as to this miracle, since we have heard how great it is, let us also search how profound it is; let us not only be delighted with its surface, but let us seek to know its depth.[4]

He refuses to allow the narrative of the miracle to be treated as a simple story of past events, offering no challenge to the people of his own times. Rather, he asserts that those who saw the loaves and fishes in purely physical terms have their counterparts in the contemporary Church:

> Jesus answered and said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye seek me, not because ye saw the signs, but because ye have eaten of my loaves. Ye seek me for the sake of the flesh, not for the sake of the spirit." How many seek Jesus for no other object but that He may bestow on them a temporal benefit! One has a business on hand, he seeks the intercession of the clergy; another is oppressed by one more powerful than himself, he flies to the church.... "Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that which endureth unto eternal life." Ye seek me for something else, seek me

[3] Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* II.I(1); translated in Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, tr. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1958).

[4] Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV* (Turnholt: Brepols 1954) xxiv:2; translated in St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, tr. J. Gibb and J. Innes, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. VII, ed. P. Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Company 1888) emphasis added.

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for my own sake. For he insinuates the truth, that Himself is that meat: this shines out clearly in the sequel: "Which the Son of man shall give you."[5]

The narratives in the Gospel display the predicament of those who were confronted by physical signs of spiritual truths but were still limited by their carnal understanding. The project of such stories was to provide their audience with an explanation for the fact that not all those who saw miracles became believers and to strengthen the faith of those who, later on, could only learn about them second-hand. Augustine brings these concerns up-to-date by shifting his focus from the internal audience for the miracle to the external audience for the miracle story. Just as there were people in the past in Palestine who saw the miracles but were attracted to Christ only for material benefits, so today, he says, there are some who hear the Gospel but are attracted to the Church only for success in temporal affairs or as an escape from worldly troubles.

BELIEF GROUNDED IN THE SENSES

John's descriptions of miracles do not all focus on observers who do not understand or believe when they are confronted by spiritual signs. In addition, he shows an interest, throughout the entire Gospel, in people who do profess belief, but rely too much on the evidence of their own senses. Although they are not in the same category as those who do not know that the sign is a sign, their excessive concern with the physical (or even the relatively trivial) is an indication that they have only begun their process of spiritual liberation.

The first such situation, in which a believer's faith is based on simple wonder at a miraculous event rather than full spiritual understanding, occurs after Christ's first supernatural action in the Gospel, his recognition of Nathanael. Philip meets Nathanael under a fig tree and invites him to meet Jesus. As they approach, Jesus calls Nathanael an Israelite in whom there is no guile, and adds that he saw him under a fig tree before Philip called him. Nathanael has no idea how Jesus could know this, and responds with a profession of faith. The inconsequential basis for his belief, however, draws a rebuke from Jesus, and leads him to

[5] *Ibid.*, xxv:10.

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declare openly the more marvellous (and more significant) events which are yet to occur:

> Nathanael saith to him: "Whence knowest thou me?" Jesus answered, and said to him: "Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee." Nathanael answered him, and said: "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God, thou art the king of Israel." Jesus answered, and said to him, "Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig three, thou believest: greater things than these shalt thou see." And he saith to him: "Amen, amen, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." (Jn 1:48-51)

This concern with the dangers of reliance on one's own senses persists to the end of the work. Perhaps the best example is the story of Thomas, who refuses to believe in the resurrection until he has felt Christ's wounds with his own hands. He too is rebuked for this desire to ground faith in physical, sensory experience: "Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed" (Jn 20:29). Post-biblical writings describe a career for St. Thomas which showed not only that he had learned his spiritual lesson from the physical sign but also that he became a master at teaching others through the analogies between carnal expectations and the truths of the faith. As the apostle to India, he made use of his reputation as an architect to raise funds for the construction of a magnificent palace for the king, but gave all the money to the poor. When the king asked where his palace was, Thomas told him that it was in heaven.[6] Still, the story of his doubt was not always treated as a way of contrasting reliance on the senses with faith in things unseen. A fourteenth-century English sermon looks on the effects of his actions on later audiences for the Gospel, and finds much to praise:

> Take we now hede to þis gospell, and ȝe may see þat Seynt Thomas dud vs more good þorowe is mysbeleue þan did all þe apostels þat beleued anoon. For be hym is putt awey all þe dowtes of oure feyȝth, and are made stabull in þe beleue.[7]

[Let us now heed this Gospel, and you may see that St. Thomas did us more good through his lack of belief than did all the apostles who believed

[6] *The Acts of Thomas* 17-24, in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, tr. M. R. James (Oxford: Clarendon 1924).

[7] *Middle English Sermons*, ed. W. O. Ross, EETS 209 (London: Oxford University Press 1938) p. 134.

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at once. Because of him, all the doubts of our faith are put aside, and we are confirmed in belief.]

THE PRESENTATION OF THE *PEARL*-NARRATOR

This material, from John, Augustine and contemporary sermons, provides the background for a reading of *Pearl*. The poet's practice, however, is not limited or determined by the attitude expressed in these works; rather, he could pick and choose from a variety of strategies in order to make his point to an audience whose expectations were conditioned by them. The decisions he made locate his poem firmly in this Christian tradition, but they also reveal him working in a particularly fourteenth-century English context and, moreover, challenging his audience in a way which sets him apart from his less imaginative contemporaries.

Since all the people in the poet's society were at least nominally Christian, there was little interest in a "multitude" which saw spiritual signs only as meaningless physical objects. The *Pearl*-Poet therefore focused on the spiritual problem of an individual man, one whose difficulties arose from a deep personal loss. Since the audience knew, or at least could say, that Christ was the bread and that the heavens opened for Christ, he chose a spiritual sign which speaks to a personal concern which requires a great deal of personal effort to understand. On the other hand, since his audience was hearing, in works like the sermon on St. Thomas, that doubt is productive and that the evidence of the senses is sufficient basis for faith, he found it necessary to give new life to the more rigorous views of John and Augustine. His first-person narrator is no worse than the members of the audience, and he is faced with a difficult personal problem, so we sympathize with him; but his attempts to deal with it are flawed because of his very reliance on the senses and his own carnal view of life. If the audience is to profit from the work, it is necessary to move beyond sympathy to a more self-conscious examination of assumptions about life in God's world.

The initial scene of *Pearl*,[8] related in retrospect by the narrator, describes how he once sat in the garden where he "lost"

[8] Quotations from *Pearl* are from *Pearl*, ed. E.V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon 1953).

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his "pearl," overcome with melancholy. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that he is lamenting the death of a daughter who is buried in that garden. He thinks of her death in purely self-centered terms, calling her his "pryuy perle" [my own pearl] in a way which suggests that he is thinking possessively about worldly attributes and not about worth of soul even when he calls her "precios perle" [precious pearl]. He is obsessed with her physical decay, and even speaks of her body in terms of its "color," that is, as something which made a sensory impression on himself:

For soþe þer fleten to me fele,
To þenke hir color so clad in clot. (21-22)

[Truly, many cares thronged about me / as I thought of her color, so clothed in dirt.]

In this third stanza, he describes how he tried to console himself by devising a more positive view of the garden, focusing on the beauties of the plants which grew in it:

Þat spot of spyseȝ mot nedeȝ sprede,
Þer such rycheȝ to rot is runne;
Blomeȝ blayke and blwe and rede
Þer schyneȝ ful schyr agayn þe sunne.
Flor and fryte may not be fede
Þer hit doun drof in moldeȝ dunne;
For vch gresse mot grow of grayneȝ dede;
No whete were elleȝ to woneȝ wonne.
Of goud vche goude is ay bygonne;
So semly a sede moȝt fayly not,
Þat spryngande spyceȝ vp ne sponne
Of þat precios perle wythouten spotte. (25-36)

[That spot, where such riches have run to rot, must be spread with spices; white, blue and red blossoms shine most brightly against the sun. The flowers and fruit where it drove down in the dark earth could not be drab.[9] Each plant must grow from dead grains, for otherwise wheat could not be brought to barns. All good begins from good; so fair a seed could not fail, but springing spices must rise up from that precious pearl without a spot.]

[9] For a discussion of alternative interpretations of this word, and a different proposal, see Edward Vasta, "*Pearl:* Immortal Flowers and the Pearl's Decay," *Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy* 66 (1967) pp. 519-31.

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Every part of this description, from the concentration on the visible to the pun involved in his choice to stay in the "spot" where the body of the aphysical "spot"-less maiden is buried, draws our attention to the narrator's carnal perspective. He may have moved from a negative to a positive description of the physical world, and from melancholy to a kind of hope, but he is still dealing with his situation in a resolutely superficial fashion. The "Blome3 blayke and blwe and rede" [white, blue and red blossoms] are an obvious antithesis to the marred, decaying flesh, and the fact that they spring up and shine against the sun is a simple inversion of the situation of the corpse, passively oppressed in the darkness of the earth. But despite the differences, he is still rooted in the physical.

He is not content, however, simply to change his focus from the corpse to the flowers as if to say, "After all, life goes on." Something of the particular life of his own pearl must survive, and so he must see the "colors" of the flowers on her grave as a continuation of her "color" (by now almost a technical term for her outward beauty). Similarly, since she was precious, the plants on her grave must be spices, the most precious of all plants. Since she was good and they are good, he must see her goodness as the source of theirs: "Of goud vche goude is ay bygonne" [all good begins from good]. Throughout this stanza, the narrator attempts to console himself for the loss of his pearl by the simple strategy of saying that all her important qualities, from her appearance to her worth, have survived death.

This attempt is grounded in an interpretation of signs. In each case, however, the narrator presents them as *signa naturalia*, "which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves."[10] Just as smoke causes us to think of fire and tracks in the sand bring the idea of an animal into our minds, so too the wealth and worth and color of the flowers, acting as simple natural facts, bring the qualities of the Pearl into the narrator's mind. He sees no meaningful message in all this, but believes only that one is the physical cause of the other, as fire causes smoke. We are left with an almost Romantic assertion that Beauty and Worth never die, but are transformed by Nature into other guises.

[10] *De Doctrina Christiana* II.I(2).

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It is a fairly good rule of thumb that where a modern reader finds Romanticism, a medieval author is depicting error. The way the narrator uses the word "precious" and his view of "worth" as a physical cause of physical events reveal him as a man fixed at an early stage of spiritual development. The poet is not the kind of writer, however, to depict such error without giving his audience directions toward the truth. In this stanza, the signpost is an allusion to a passage in John's Gospel which comes immediately before the reference to God's voice in a thunderclap discussed above. When the narrator says:

> For vch gresse mot grow of grayneȝ dede;
> No whete were elleȝ to woneȝ wonne. (31-32)
>
> [Each plant must grow from dead grains, for otherwise/ no wheat could be brought to barns.]

his words call to mind Christ's statement,

> "Amen, amen I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falling into the earth die, it remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (Jn 12:24-25).

When a character in a modern work makes a literary allusion, we are usually expected to consider it a conscious action and to believe that his words subsume the meaning of the original text while retaining their force within the immediate situation. In a medieval work, however, the author is more frequently inviting the audience to compare the two texts, usually with a view to demonstrating the comparative ignorance of the character. This too is a technique from the Gospels: the most extreme case may be found in the bystanders at the crucifixion, for they fulfilled many prophecies from the Old Testament, in word and action, without being aware that they were doing so. In *Pearl*, the narrator's view of the fact that new plants grow from dead seeds is as limited as that of the Gospel multitude who hear only thunder when God speaks.

Christ takes a sign from the world of nature to make a spiritual point by analogy; the meaning of the sign is presented clearly in the next sentence: "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world keepeth it unto life

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eternal" (Jn 12:25). The man who is unwilling to let his earthly life go will end up losing it to no profit; the one who gives it up willingly will be rewarded with eternal life, which stands in the same relationship to transitory existence as a live plant stands to a dead seed.

But it is necessary to recognize the difference between the terms of the analogy as well as the similarities. Paul dealt extensively with the nature of the comparison in First Corinthians, responding to questions about the resurrection of the dead: "But some man will say: 'How do the dead rise again? or with what manner of body shall they come?' Senseless man, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die first. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be; but bare grain, as of wheat, or of some of the rest. But God giveth it a body as he will: and to every seed its proper body" (1 Cor 15:35-38). Paul is weaning his audience away from the view that the seed and the plant are one. God transforms a single grain into the kind of plant and fruit he wishes, and so too he will give an appropriate body to the dead, when he so chooses.

The problem with the *Pearl*-narrator is that he wants his Pearl to be given the kind of body *he* chooses, and it is one imagined from a purely natural, causal view of the process. He does not know that the growth of a new plant from a seed is a sign, and so he is a slave to that sign. His restrictions on the manner in which new life springs from the seed are an attempt to maintain his private pearl, whereas the biblical passages alluded to by the author display the possibilities of a truly precious pearl. For the new body which is raised from the dead is, in Paul's view, not only different from the old body but incomparably better:

> All flesh is not the same flesh: but one is the flesh of men, another of beasts, another of birds, another of fishes. And there are bodies celestial, and bodies terrestrial: but one is the glory of the celestial, and another is the glory of the terrestrial. One is the glory of the sun, another the glory of the moon, and another the glory of the stars. For star differeth from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption, it shall rise in incorruption. (1 Cor 15:39-42)

The narrator does not recognize the difference between the glory of the bodies of the living and the bodies of the dead who have been raised, and so wishes to keep control over the earthly

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qualities of his lost Pearl. The allusion tells the audience that Pearl will rise in incorruptible splendor, but the narrator is still obsessed with physical corruption. He worries about the marring of the private, physical jewel and the dirtying of its physical color (22-23) and is shocked by the idea that wealth is running to rot (26). If he had truly learned the lesson that Christ's nature had taught ("for Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection of the dead," 1 Cor 15:20), he would see the death and burial of Pearl as merely the first step toward eternal life in a spiritual body.

The narrator's interpretive strategies are insufficient to deal with the sign, and they remain so even when he is granted a fuller vision of the spiritual world. When he sees the Pearl-maiden, he is overjoyed to find (as he thinks) that he has not in fact lost his Pearl, and believes that they will stay together forever:

> I trawed my perle don out of dawe3.
> Now haf I fonde hyt, I schal ma feste,
> And wony wyth hyt in schyr wod-schawe3 (282-84)
>
> [I thought my pearl was dead (lit., "put out of days"). / Now I have found it, and I shall make a feast, / and stay with it in bright groves.]

The Pearl-maiden reproaches him, and by implication all those in the audience who, like the preacher of the sermon on St. Thomas, validate doubt and their own judgment based on physical senses:

> 'I halde þat iueler lyttel to prayse
> Þat leue3 wel þat he se3 wyth y3e,
> And much to blame and vncortayse
> Þat leue3 oure Lorde wolde make a ly3e,
> Þat lelly hy3te your lyf to rayse,
> Þa3 fortune dyd your flesch to dy3e.
> 3e setten hys worde3 ful westernays
> Þat leue3 noþynk bot 3e hit sy3e.
> And þat is a poynt o sorquydry3e,
> Þat vche god mon may euel byseme,
> To leue no tale be true to try3e
> Bot þat hys one skyl may dem.' (301-12)
>
> [I consider that jeweller little to be praised, who well believes what he sees with his eyes. He who believes Our Lord would make a lie is discourteous and much to blame. For he loyally promised to raise

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your life, although fortune should cause your flesh to die. You are turning his words awry, when you believe nothing unless you see it. That is a point of presumption, for it is not fitting for any good man to believe that no statement is true, when put to the test, except the one that his own reason judges.]

THE AUTHOR'S DEMANDS ON HIS AUDIENCE

The narrator here is in a quite different position from the participants in biblical narratives who are given a chance to move from purely physical understanding of divine signs to a more spiritual state, and the poet's use of the image of the seed shows a more complex and demanding point of view than many of his contemporaries. The most striking contrast emerges from a comparison of the *Pearl*-poet's attitudes toward those who over-emphasize physical proof with the views of other commentators of his tradition. He presents us with a character who is less successful in his attempt to understand spiritual matters through carnal perceptions and a narrative which makes stronger demands on its audience. We cannot sit back complacently and feel that our doubts have been removed for us, but must make the full intellectual effort required by Augustinian analysis of the text in order to profit from its message.

This may be seen from a minute examination of the two lines alluding to John, which must proceed according to the various contexts in which they are embedded and the various levels of the speaker-audience relationship. When the image is first formed, as the narrator sits in the garden where he has lost his Pearl, the speaker is the narrator who wishes to console and the audience is the narrator in need of consolation. The speaker understands the natural fact that plants grow from dead seeds in a purely natural fashion, as a proof by analogy that the worth and qualities of the dead Pearl continue to exist in the perceptible world. The hearer, that is, the grieving part of the narrator, understands the words in the same way, but is not consoled. He may not know why this consolatory strategy is unsuccessful, but with our knowledge of the passages from John and Paul we know that such attempts must always fail since they are grounded in the temporal world of corruption and decay. The narrator is bound by the view that physical death is a cause for

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lamentation, and so he is unable to devise consoling techniques satisfying even to himself.

Yet it is necessary to proceed to a second level of analysis, since these two lines are presented to us not only at the moment when the idea first occurred to the narrator. We are not eavesdroppers as he soliloquizes, but rather we listen to him as he describes his experiences after the fact. After he has failed to console himself, after he has fallen asleep and dreamed, after he has been rebuked by the Pearl-maiden, after he has tried to cross the river to Paradise and failed, he awakes and recounts the whole experience. In this case, the speaker is the narrator describing his own speech at secondhand, and the audience is the audience of the poem. This change in context also changes the content of the utterance. The narrator is saying, "There was a time when I said to myself, 'As plants grow from dead seeds, so too the quality of my Pearl are still present to me to see,' but it did not console me." His purpose is simply to describe an experience of his own as a preliminary to a marvellous vision; we see it, again with the aid of biblical analogues, as a confession of his own spiritual inadequacies and of the limitations of his understanding of the truth even when it is displayed to him. Here, as during his vision, he seeks temporal gifts, not Christ himself. He is perfectly congruent with the man who will later seek even eternity as if it were a physical possession.

The third level is the poetic situation, in which we are the audience, detached from the narrator's immediate situation and able to analyze his words in the light of the biblical use of spiritual signs, and the speaker is the poet who recognizes these abilities and can manipulate our response through them. At this level, the poet is saying, "There once was a man who even after a full, doctrinally correct vision of the afterlife, was incapable of understanding why he could not console himself by saying, 'As plants grow from dead seeds, so too the qualities of my Pearl are still present for me to see.'" This is a disturbing break with narrative patterns found in the Gospels and in other medieval doctrinal works, since we expect that the recipient of the vision will profit from it; anyone who does not profit from such an experience usually leaves the story without further engaging our interest. These expectations are at the root of modern readings which overemphasize the successes in the edu-

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cation of the *Pearl*-narrator.[11]

But the *Pearl*-poet is confronting a more difficult problem than his colleagues, and therefore leaves his audience in a more complex situation when his work is done. By concentrating on the importance of the personal choice between treating signs as physical objects and decoding them to find their underlying spiritual truths, he is making greater demands on the intellectual capabilities of his audience. By depicting a narrator who does not move smoothly through the sequence of experiences to a complete understanding, he is cautioning us about the difficulty of apprehending spiritual truths, especially for one who is accustomed to relying on the things of this world as analogues. In opposition to the writers of magical tales of enlightenment granted through unambiguous visions, he is insisting that the personal situation of *homo viator* impedes or even prevents the easy understanding of spiritual truths signified by objects accessible to the senses.

These considerations lead us to the final level of meaning in the passage, which treats *Pearl* as a socio-historical fact. In late fourteenth-century England, there was an author who believed it was both possible and necessary to deliver a message about the practical difficulties of conveying a spiritual truth to temporal man, bound as he is by his desire to maintain control over what he sees as his private possessions. Further, he believed it was possible and necessary to embody that message in the form of a narrative of a failed attempt by a particular man to console himself over a deep personal loss. Finally, he found it appropriate to convey his ideas through a poem which requires a multi-levelled analysis of the relationship between apparently simple utterances and a variety of contexts: biblical aphorisms, conventional beliefs, and, most importantly, audience response.

At this level, we must disassociate ourselves from the original

[11] W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet* (London: Athlone Press 1978) p. 37, speaks of "a reconciliation of the warring elements when the Dreamer becomes one whole being again as he awakes." Lynn Staley Johnson, *The Voice of the* Gawain-*Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1984) p. 177, believes that the narrator moves "from despair to grief to faith, love, and renewed life." Charles Moorman, "The Role of the Narrator in *Pearl*," in *The Middle English Pearl*, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1970) p. 120, says that "all doubts, all challenges, all questionings, have been removed from" the narrator.

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implied audience, for the author did not intend to speak to us about twentieth-century concerns. But the fact that such an author, in the fourteenth century, could write such a complex work and anticipate such a response from an audience is a valuable piece of information in our attempt to understand the period. I do not want to assert that such an audience existed as a concrete historical fact: indeed, the survival of the poem in only one manuscript suggests that the poet did not find the readers he expected. But if the same rules of meaning apply to the poem as a whole as to its separate words and utterances, its meaning both defines and is defined by the audience response it implies. The spiritual and intellectual characteristics of the intended audience may be defined, although in rather rough fashion. Nourished on skeletal *exempla* which deliver spiritual messages in an easy, mechanically decodable form, they have come to consider all members of an audience equally able to receive the messages which are offered to them. They have lost touch with the basic Augustinian principles which focus on the concrete personal situation of the individual, since the sermons on the period rely too much on excerpts and on those aspects of Augustinian exegesis which require the least interpretive effort on the part of the audience. They feel in a privileged position vis-à-vis the truths of Christianity, not limited in perception like the crowds in the Gospel stories. It is not surprising, therefore, that the poet should consider that his audience needs to be enticed into a reflective view of their own situation, in line with a deeper understanding of the full Augustinian project. It is all well and good to listen to the conclusions of Augustine's analyses of biblical texts or specific moral problems, but it is quite another thing to recognize the importance of his thought to one's own life, especially in such situations as the loss of a beloved daughter. The "judgment" of the narrator within the poem and of the audience who read it is not the passing of a sentence or a command to the saved and the damned to go their separate ways. Rather, like the judgment in John's Gospel, those who do not comprehend the spiritual message are by that very fact excluding themselves, however temporarily, from the community of believers. It is a mark of the poet's faith and his optimism concerning his fellow man that he believed his work could further the spiritual progress of his readers.

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